

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

by Daphne Classen

"What you leave behind is not engraved in stone but is woven into the lives of others"- Pericles

Susan leaned against the kitchen counter, watching Emma carefully place a neat, handwritten label beneath a glossy photo. The kitchen smelled of coffee and cinnamon and the late afternoon light caught the gold rim of the photo album sprawled across the table.

"Gosh, this is a massive job," Susan said, shaking her head. "I don't know how you find patience or the time."

Emma smiled, smoothing out the page. "I've done one every year since David and I got married. It's my way of capturing all the important moments, like a time capsule. One day, I hope my grandkids – maybe even great-grandkids-will find them interesting."

Susan snorted. "Oh, my kids won't. They'll say: 'Mom, I 've got it all on my phone'"

Emma chuckled. "You're not the first to tell me that. But David loves looking back at these – especially the early years when the kids were small. He flips through, muttering, "Where did the time go?"

"Yes, Emma, the word TIME has hit a nerve. I have reached my three score and ten and for the first time since I was twenty-four, I now have time for myself. I am cherishing every minute of this last decade and don't want to do anything I don't have to do. After all the years of being a supportive daughter to a single mother, a loving wife for thirty-five years and a mother who gave of herself every day to four children, I am now alone and free to have time for myself."

Emma frowned. "You do not resent having been a giving person for so long, do you, Susan? You were a rock to your mother and your husband till the day they passed, and your children think the sun shines out of you. So please explain what you mean."

"Oh, Emma, I realize I sound selfish. I miss my darling Robert every day and am still a mother hen, checking on the welfare of the kids and grandkids, but for so long I never had time to pamper myself or enjoy a day with no obligations."

"You touched so many lives in those years, Susan, that it would be impossible to isolate yourself now. You are probably just tired. You are blessed to have more free time; many seniors are not so lucky. Now is the time to do some of those

things you have been putting off for so long. I find inner peace by doing quiet things, such as leaving a legacy with my albums. We need to have time for ourselves but also need to use our unique talents within the community and possibly even inspire others."

She paused, running a finger over the edge of a photograph. "When I was a teenager, I loved looking through my mother's albums. They weren't as organized as mine, but they had stories." Her eyes twinkled. "Like the austere old gentleman with the sharp beard? Turns out he was a wild young guitarist, travelling the world before settling down. And then there was my aunt Roslyn – she's the reason I started documenting everything."

Susan raised an eyebrow. "Aunt Roslyn?"

Emma flipped to a black-and-white photo of a young woman in a stylish cloche hat, her eyes alight with mischief. "Born in London, 9th August 1909. Lived a bigger life than most of us ever will. She was featured in *The Australian Women's Weekly* recently – one of the 'Remarkable Women of the Twentieth Century.'"

Susan's brow furrowed. "Oh, I saw that series"! About women breaking boundaries?"

Emma smiled. "Yes, do you remember how we read and discussed Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* when we were at uni? We were so keen to lead meaningful lives as women. Idealistic feminists we were!"

"So, tell me, Emma, what was so special about Aunt Roslyn?"

"She was a true flapper, dancing the Charleston and running with a fast crowd. But beneath the fringed dresses and champagne, she was fiercely independent. A roaring Leo lion, my mother used to say."

She turned the page, revealing another image: Roslyn, straddling a motorbike, a rebellious grin on her face.

"My grandmother nearly fainted when she found out Roslyn was one of the first women in London to own a motorbike. She'd zip through the streets to deliver her articles to the newspapers about women surviving in a man's world.

When London felt too small, she travelled widely. In Canada she journeyed to the snow-dusted peaks where she met and fell in love with a Mountie, after he rescued her when her bike would not start. Even the passionate love affair could

not stop her from travelling back to Europe to Berlin. She realized her mistake when Hitler began to make his mark so she quickly sought safer shores.

Her writing landed her a job with a New York magazine, and she was there when Wall Street crashed in 1929. For the rest of her life, till the ripe old age of 93, she fought against male-domination in journalism and promoted the woman's voice in her articles."

"Good heavens, Emma. She would have been a challenge for any man. Did she ever marry?"

"Yes, she did settle down in Sydney at thirty and married a medical doctor and produced two children, both girls. They both turned out as feisty as she had been. The elder daughter, Lisa, became an orthopedic specialist and was at the forefront of issues for women in medicine when in the 1960s fewer than 10% of medical students were women. Her other daughter, Kay, became a writer like mom and wrote a couple of historical novels."

"What amazing women, Emma. I see what you mean about being inspired. Despite sounding so self-absorbed when we started chatting today, I have tried to inspire people. As a teacher I spent years trying to convince my students that they mattered. I used to tell them life is a giant puzzle and that each of us is a unique piece. If you don't fit, it's not because you are wrong – its because your spot is somewhere else."

Emma smiles. "Did they believe you?"

Susan laughed softly. "They listened. Some respectfully, some because they had to. But every now and then, years later, I'd get an email. 'Ms. Carter, you probably don't remember me, but ...' And then they'd tell me that something I said stuck with them. Something small. A puzzle piece they needed at the time."

Emma reached across the table and squeezed Susan's hand. "See? That's a meaningful life."

Susan exhaled, a slow smile forming."Yeah, I guess it is."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment before Emma picked up another photo, reaching for her pen. "Now let's get back to the time capsules."

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